

### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the Strategic Master Plan for Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities is to provide a broad policy and management framework to guide decision-making to meet current and future land use and recreational needs of Alexandria residents for the next 10 years. The recommended vision, policies, and actions are intended to further the city's comprehensive planning approach for the recreational needs for residents, the existing work force, and visitors to Alexandria.



The Strategic Master Plan is comprehensive and incorporates two separate planning processes. In 2001, the city commissioned Rhodeside & Harwell, Inc. a land use and open space planning firm to conduct the open space plan. The land use and open space plan focused on existing parks and open space and identified available lands that could be suited for parks or preserved for open space. In addition, the open space plan addressed linkages of where greenways and streambeds could be used to connect the parks and recreation system through a series of trails through out the city.

Leon Younger & PROS was commissioned in late 2001 to develop a Recreation Needs Assessment for the remaining components of the Strategic Plan. Both studies had high levels of community input. The Recreation Needs Assessment included a recreation programs and facilities analysis, a community survey, citizen focus groups, a demographics review, park maintenance analysis, open space analysis, administrative policies analysis for marketing, volunteer development, capital improvement needs, and governance issues.

The Strategic Plan, while looking at the next 10 years of needs, specifically identifies key milestones to be achieved over the first five years and creates action plans through which the organization can guide its efforts.



The Strategic Master Plan is a living document that will require annual review of the work accomplished and the outcomes achieved. At a minimum, this plan should be updated every five years to keep pace with Alexandria's changing environment. This plan will require the support of many other city departments to achieve the community's vision that is desired. The departments that must embrace this plan include the Police and Fire Departments, the Planning Department, the Transportation and Environmental Services Department, and the Department of Human Services. The recommendations in this plan are achievable and must be followed for the city to continue its efforts to achieve maximum livability and a balance with economic development and population growth.

### THE CITY

The City of Alexandria is the tenth most densely populated city in America which is comparable to the density levels of Detroit, Minneapolis, Cleveland and some boroughs of New York. Parkland is scarce and the city has had ample catching up to do over the past 52 years since its first park was developed. Currently the City maintains 127 park sites totaling approximately 840 acres.

Providing for the general public's recreational needs is one of the greatest challenges facing Alexandria governing bodies today. The challenge is complicated by ever-changing demands and expectations caused by increasing population growth and shifting community demographic profiles. To meet these needs the mission of the Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities Department is the following:

*"The Alexandria Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities Department will provide the highest levels of quality services to meet citizens expectations. We will create safe and desirable environments for users in all parks and recreation facilities through high levels of maintenance and security services. Our programs and facilities will meet diverse population needs and enhance all citizens quality of life. We will help define the community by being champions for the protection and advancement of open space and natural resource areas."*

Over the Strategic Master Plan's 10 year horizon, Alexandria's population is expected to grow to another 5,000 to 7,000. As development continues, opportunities to secure park sites diminish because of escalating land costs and the inability of the city to compete with private sector developers.

In 1990, Alexandria had 7.5 acres of active and passive open space per 1,000 residents, based upon 111,000 population. Between 1990-2000 the city added 125 acres of open space, and 17,000 residents. In 2000, Alexandria remained at 7.5 acres per 1,000 residents despite adding the 125 acres of parkland. In 2012, with a projected population of 142,000, the city will be required to add 100 acres of open space to maintain 7.5 acres per 1,000 residents.

Through the citizen survey, the community as a whole indicated their most important needs are for the city to acquire land for trails, neighborhood parks, and land for preservation purposes. This should be a major goal of the city leadership before it is too late and the available land becomes unavailable.

Geographic equity of park access is also an important consideration to provide short-distance access and service to all city residents. Park site acquisitions should be balanced and proportional to service populations in all areas of the city. The equity and open space maps clearly demonstrate where the land and park inequities are occurring. (Please refer to the *Neighborhood Park Service Areas map* found on page 40.) In addition, the open space maps also demonstrate the scarcity of land for park purposes. Even though there are slim resources, the city still has opportunities it should pursue. These opportunities are outlined in the Open Space Plan.

### OPEN SPACE

#### Open space - Where is Alexandria now?

The City has just completed an comprehensive study of Open Space in Alexandria and this document will become a part of the City's Master Plan. Because open space is so crucial to the Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities Department (RPCA), we have included the pieces of the Open Space Plan that relate directly to the operation of this Department. We recognize that all initiatives in meeting the Open Space goals will take the cooperation of many city departments and in no way is the soul responsibility of this Department.

In 1990, Alexandria was ranked the eleventh most densely populated city in the United States. Today, it is the tenth most densely populated city. Over the past decade, the density level has increased from eleven persons per acre in 1990, to 12.7 persons per acre in the year 2000. This is a 15 percent increase.

On a regional level, at 8,145 persons per square mile, the City of Alexandria is denser than either of its immediate neighbors. Arlington County has 7,315 persons per square mile and Fairfax County has a mere 2,385 persons per square mile.

#### Open Space - What are our needs in terms of open space?

Through a series of public input processes, the following citizen needs for open space were discussed. The City's overall needs are documented in the Open Space Plan, the following needs are directly related to the Department of RPCA:

- The need for achieving continuous public open space corridor along the Potomac River
- The need to create open space connections throughout the city through pedestrian friendly streets, trails, and enhanced streetscape corridors.
- The need to protect and enhance the city's stream valleys and other natural areas.
- The need to maximize the use and visual quality of all open space.
- The need to protect existing parkland from development.
- The need to preserve areas of significant tree cover.
- The need to seek acquisition of open space for park purposes in sections of the city where there is a need. (e.g. the west end and northeast portions of the city.)
- The need to provide additional multi-purpose fields.
- The need to identify and enforce all existing public easements, which could serve as trail linkages.
- The need to minimize surface parking lots in park land.
- The need to define and develop attractive greenways to the city.

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- The need to make better use of open space areas around school properties for habitats, gardens, educational and community opportunities.

### Goals for the Department of Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities to Achieve the Community's Needs for Open Space.

The following goals have been established for the department to meet citizens' needs. In many instances it will take the cooperation of this department along with other city departments to meet the goals. (Refer to matrix on page 47 for specific tactics and time line to achieve the goals).

1. Assist in the development of an Alexandria Open Space Public/Private Advocacy Group. An additional 100 acres of open space should be acquired in the next ten years to ensure the current 7.5 acres per 1,000 residents is maintained.
2. Connect the community through an effective trails system by developing fifteen miles of new trails in the next ten years.
3. Establish equal opportunity/proximity to parks, recreation facilities and programs, citywide. Parks and a recreation facility are needed in the far west end of the city.
4. Assist in developing innovative opportunities for creating additional open space with other city departments and citizens.
5. Protect and enhance the urban forest and beautification of the city.
6. Protect and enrich existing parks.
7. Provide the highest level of safety in parks and recreation facilities.
8. Assist in the implementation and completion of the Potomac River Waterfront Plan as it relates to public park land.
9. Assist in protecting and expanding stream valleys and other environmentally sensitive areas.
10. Assist in maximizing use of public school open space areas to satisfy local needs.
11. Assist in enhancing streetscapes and gateways.
12. Continue to explore funding options for acquisitions and protection of properties.

***"A nation behaves well if it treats its natural resources as assets which it must turn over to the next generation."***

***-Theodore Roosevelt***

## Parks

### Parks - Where are we now?

The City of Alexandria currently has 127 parks and open space areas that total 964 acres. It was not until 1958, nearly 200 years after the founding of Alexandria, the city recreation department planned to build its first official park. Therefore, it was not until the later half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that Alexandria began to establish its system of public parks. The city continues to struggle against history whereby it was perceived that land was too valuable of a commodity to be used as open space or parks. While the city has come a long way in creating a livable, green community for its residents, it must resist the trends of history and provide ample open space for future generations.

The unique features of the city, as well as the quality of services that the city provides, molds the image that the city projects. Quality open spaces, parks, schools, and responsive safety measures collectively create a sense of a well balanced community.

Through citizen input in the resident survey, 66% of Alexandrians had visited a city park last year. This is below average in comparison to many cities the consulting team has been involved with in developing Strategic Master Plans. Currently, 27% of the citizens rate the physical condition of city-operated parks they visited as 'excellent' and 52% as 'good'. The survey indicates 90% of the city residents say 'yes' when asked if parks enhance their property value. Of the residents surveyed, 78% indicated that parks provide economic benefits to the city. With these strong percentages, the citizens are saying they believe parks are a high priority in Alexandria.

### **Parks - What are the Alexandria park needs?**

Citizens interviewed in focus groups, public forums and through the citizen household survey, indicated the following park needs should be addressed:

- - Additional and better-maintained athletic fields are needed for both youth and adults.
  - Several areas in the city are not adequately served by neighborhood parks and sports fields. Particularly in the west end of the City.
  - Park infrastructure needs improvement especially the turf areas.
  - Many parks are too small for the neighborhoods that use them.
  - Upgrading of maintenance standards in many of the parks is needed.
  - The city is over-scheduling park facilities.

### **Goals to Achieve the Community's Needs for Parks**

The city needs to create a balance of spending between recreation services and park infrastructure and maintenance. There are always more users of parks than recreation services in a city. It is imperative the city focus on maintaining park property that is currently owned and invest in the parks infrastructure and maintenance so property values are maintained. Additionally, the parks should support the level of use they receive.

The city needs to strive to meet the following goals:

1. Provide the highest level of safety in parks by creating maintenance standards for all assets within the parks and recreation system.
2. Develop design standards and guidelines for renovation and the development of new parks and facilities based on actual and emerging user demands.
3. Acquire more land for game fields for both adults and youth.
4. Manage existing capacity of fields.

5. Seek more user investment to offset maintenance costs of fields when user groups want higher levels of maintenance above what the city is currently providing.
6. Acquire land for parks in under served areas of the city for neighborhood parks, especially in the west end of the city.
7. Encourage private sector acknowledgment of their role in providing more parks in high-density areas.
8. Enhance open space requirements for new developments.
9. Curtail granting of encroachments in RPA's and adjacent areas.
10. Increase partnership teams with schools, private institutions and the city to design solutions for new and renovated properties.
11. Improve infrastructure of some parks by investing \$10,000 per acre for lighting, drainage, parking, irrigation and fencing.
12. Enhance existing park maintenance partnerships.
13. Create a dedicated funding source for capital improvements, and land acquisition.

## Recreation Facilities

### Recreation Facilities – Where are we now?

The City of Alexandria has ten indoor recreation facilities. The majority of the recreation centers are small in size. (8,000 to 18,000 square feet). These facilities serve one or two neighborhoods. Only Chinquapin Recreation Center truly serves a community-wide audience. The total amount of programmable square footage space available is 170,682. This is above the national average for indoor space but the key issue is how the space is used. The majority of recreation centers are served by youth and have minimal adult usage. This is due to the space being utilized for school purposes, as well as, after school, weekend, and summer programs.

The city has one indoor pool, which is located at Chinquapin Recreation Center and is heavily used by youth and adults. The majority of the city's three outdoor swimming pools are very small in size and again have little adult market appeal. These pools are also used for summer day camp activities.

Many of the recreation centers need infrastructure improvements and have outdated equipment. Of the households responding to the resident survey, only 29% have used recreation facilities provided by the city in the past two years. The overall satisfaction with recreation facilities in the city was 34% of citizens being 'very satisfied' and 34% being 'somewhat satisfied'. These survey percentages are below normal compared to other recreation surveys from other cities according to the consulting team who has conducted various Strategic Master Plans.

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### Recreation Facilities – What are the facility needs?

The community of Alexandria has indicated through focus groups, public forums and a residential citizen survey their most important recreation facilities needs. These are listed in order of priority.



- Walking and biking trails
- Neighborhood parks
- Playgrounds
- Indoor swimming centers
- Community recreation centers
- Dog parks
- Tennis facilities
- Sports fields

Additionally, the majority of respondents (66% from the citizen survey) believe the city should develop indoor recreation programming space that supports a multi-generational indoor recreation center that can serve all ages as a priority. This far exceeds the development of a special teen center (31%) or a special senior center (26%) to be used by only seniors or teens.

The city needs to renovate the infrastructure of the current recreation centers, especially at Charles Houston and Patrick Henry Recreation Centers.

There is also a need for adding one additional neighborhood center in the western portion of the city where density levels are high.

Overall, the city needs to increase programs targeted for adults and to increase the availability of recreation facilities for all citizens.

### Goals to Achieve the Community's Needs for Recreation Facilities

Meeting the residents' recreational facility needs will take careful planning by citizens and staff. Feasibility studies for facilities need to be accomplished well in advance of any new building or renovation plans. The following goals have been established by staff and consultants to meet the recreations facility needs in the next ten years.

1. Explore the feasibility of enlarging Chinquapin Recreation Center to become the multi-generational center the residents desire.
2. Begin planning for the renovation of Patrick Henry and Charles Houston Recreation Center.
3. Explore the feasibility of acquiring property and constructing a new neighborhood recreation center on the city's west side to support its population density.
4. Develop feasibility studies and business plans for each new or renovated recreation facility. This will achieve the maximum usage and productivity of each center. These studies will match program needs of the neighborhoods served by the facility.



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5. Create design standards for indoor and outdoor recreation facilities to maximize its resources used by the greatest number of users.
6. Through effective partnerships with schools and other public and private agencies, the city could increase recreation space both indoor and outdoor to support the recreation needs of youth and adults. This will require all partners be involved in the planning process of new or renovated indoor and outdoor recreation space.
7. Where appropriate, develop a free or subsidized recreation rider program to support user access to all recreation centers in the city to support greater access and usage.

## RECREATION PROGRAMS

### Recreation programs – Where are we now?

The consulting team evaluated the recreation programs and gathered public input from focus groups, public forums, and from a resident survey. The level of survey respondents who participated in recreation programs over the past twelve months, is 42%. This number is low for a city with ten recreation facilities currently in operation. The recreation programs most participated in were festivals and special events (48%), swimming (22%), fitness and aerobics (16%), tennis (11%), dance/music (10%), and sports activities (5%). Residents rated the quality of the city's recreation programs in which they had participated in as 'excellent' at 28% and 'good' at 60%. This demonstrates the community recognizes the value and quality of their experience in city-sponsored programs.

Overall, there is not a clear understanding by the staff and the community on what the city should be providing in core and non-core services.

*Core services* are services that are represented by five key principles. These include:

1. The program service is offered three out of four planning seasons.
2. There is dedicated full-time staff to support the program.
3. There are dedicated facilities designated to support the program.
4. The core recreation program consumes a large amount of the budget.
5. The core program has a deep history with wide demographic appeal.

Currently, the majority of users of the city recreation programs are youth and many age groups do not take advantage of programs offered. This is a marketing issue, as well as a program availability issue.

In addition to not having a clear understanding of core progress the city does not know the true cost to produce a recreation service to establish the cost benefit in providing the service. The recreation program pricing is inconsistent across the city and program prices do not reflect the level of benefits received.



### **Recreation programs – What are the program needs?**

The recreation program needs of the residents and staff begins with a clear understanding of how large the programs market is and what programs the citizens are interested in attending in order for the city to maximize its resources the Department should:

- Develop business plans for core services to establish a clear understanding of who is being served and who is not being served. Additionally, the city should understand who is under served within the City of Alexandria.
- Establish program standards for core services so these services are provided consistently across the city. This applies to pricing and management of recreation services where inconsistencies are prevalent.
- Enhance program partnerships in the city regarding public/public partnerships and public/ not-for-profit partnerships. Many of the partnerships are not equitable and the city is supporting the partnerships at a higher level than necessary.
- Provide more adult and senior services within the city to create lifetime users of city's services. With the large amount of adult population versus youth population in the city, these age groups should be represented with much more adult participation in recreation programs than what currently exists.

### **Goals to Achieve the Community's Needs for Recreation Programming**

The Department of Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities staff works extremely hard to meet all the needs of the citizens participating in their programs. Staff needs to evaluate program offering and offer consistent core programs for all ages throughout the city and offer specialty programs only where citizen needs exist. The following goals have been established.

1. Establish Core and Non-Core programs  
The staff must set consistent standards for how programs are delivered and define methods they will use for evaluating user satisfaction for the services provided.
2. Create a pricing philosophy and standards for all departmental programs and services, city wide.  
To accomplish this, staff needs to review the true costs of services in terms of benefits received. This will require the city to update its pricing policy as well as to seek new earned income opportunities to offset operation costs. This may require the city to partner with the private or not-for-profit sector to assist in delivering programs while maintaining low user fees. A grant writer would assist the department in additional funding opportunities.
3. Establish customer service standards for all operations.
4. Establish citywide communication standards to encourage participation in programs and events for all age groups.
5. Enhance evaluation methods and maintain statistical records to support programming opportunities.

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6. Enhance partnership opportunities to assist in offering recreation opportunities to a broader range of citizens

### Administrative Goals to assist in the implementation of the Strategic Plan.

In order for the open space, parks, facilities and program goals to be met it is necessary to have strong administrative procedures in place. The following will assist each of the areas as they move forward to achieve the defined outcomes:

1. Review and update all department policies every five years to support the goals of the department and to maximize public access to services.
2. Develop technology standards that provide for efficiency of operations and service delivery.
3. Provide volunteer opportunities in the department that provide lifetime experiences for members of the community when they volunteer their services. A dedicated staff person should oversee the volunteer opportunities.
4. Enhance human resource standards through licensing, accreditation, certification and training of personnel.
5. Enhance private or not-for-profit partnerships that provide services beyond the city's capability and/or for efficiency purposes.
6. Enhance and support the role of commissions, committees and advisory groups to maintain a constant flow of information both into and out of the Department.

### Capital Improvement Needs

The capital improvement needs for implementing the Strategic Master Plan will require \$18 million dollars based on 2003 costs for general recreation facility improvements. An additional \$9 million is needed for general park maintenance improvements, and a minimum \$50 million is needed for land acquisition and the purchasing of easements. This will total \$77 million over the next ten years.

Should the city move forward on trail improvements, it would cost approximately \$500,000 per mile. Should the city decide to develop a west side recreation center and a multi-generational center, it will cost approximately \$170.00 per square foot based on 2002 dollars. Detailed costs can be found on pages 72-73.

### Summary of Key Recommendations

The Strategic Master Plan addresses several key issues that the city must act on over the next ten years. The most important recommendations include developing fifteen miles of new trails to connect the parks system and provide a greater ease of access for citizens to move about the city. An additional 100 acres of open space should be acquired to provide greater equity of access to parks. Additional recommendations are to develop a new multi-generational center in the center of the city, renovate both Charles Houston and Patrick Henry Recreation Centers, develop a new neighborhood recreation center in the western part of the city, add additional sports fields, and create new funding sources to support operational costs, capital costs and open space acquisition. The city should consider developing effective partnerships, enhance the urban forest, make the necessary capital improvements to existing recreation centers and parks, and develop greater marketing efforts to increase the community's awareness of the services provided and provide strong staff training and development. This Strategic Master Plan was developed by the citizens of Alexandria to detail what they want the Parks and Recreation Department to deliver for the next ten years. The vision was developed by focusing on community values, past history, key trends in parks and recreation management, park design, and program services.

Leon Younger and PROS and Rhodeside & Harwell, Inc. have completed their work and have delivered the final reports. The key leadership of the City, the Department of Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities, the Planning Department, the Department of Transportation, Department of Environmental Services and Department of Human Services must now use the data, recommendations, and processes collected to implement this plan. It will be necessary to consistently monitor trends that affect the recommendations and act accordingly. It will be equally important to continually gain community input.

